

Preliminary notes on the work of art in the age of reproductive systems

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In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin analyses the change that takes place when the unique art object is supplanted by or has to exist along side of the work such as the photograph which exists in multiple copies, none of which is truly "the original." Benjamin's analysis changed the way we think about art, particularly media arts. At the same time, though, there is a further development in art expression which has become fully apparent only in more recent times. This new development is based around several significant additions to the cultural world around us: electronic transmission, reproductive systems technology, and the exponential growth of media material. While none of these alone completes the change, together they form a new situation.

Electronic transmission, as with the radio, existed in Benjamin's time, but not to the extent that it dominates in ours. Because it creates the possibility for instantaneous communication, it has "shrunk the globe," as is often said. Of course, from a Marxist point of view, it is not substantially different than the telegraph. That is under capitalism the technology remains in the hands of capitalists or the state as a moderator of conflicting capitalist interests. And under existing forms of socialism it remains centralized in state organization. In these ways the mere fact of satellite relays does not automatically change anything: social relations remain intact. That is, there are still classes within society, there is still restricted ownership and control of transmission, and technological change alone does not change that. In fact there's a very good case to be made that it simply increases control and centralizes it. Yes you can buy a modem at Radio Shack, but you still have to use the transmission facilities of a corporation to transmit to someone else. In that sense you still are within the same social framework as having to use the U.S. post office or UPS to send your illegally duped videotape or xeroxed copy of something.

So, we always have to ask, about any technological change or development, how it effects social relationships in society and how it fits into the economic organization of the culture. Many changes take place in the superstructure without producing a change in the infrastructure. Failing to understand this, our analysis of technological change can easily run aground. In the early 60s, for example, Marshall McLuhan posited a change in consciousness and society based on his observation of a very different media environment around us. By combining an historical analogy and phenomenological positivism, he concluded that consciousness itself was changing on an individual and global level because of technological change. (note--historical analogy: his book previous to *The Medium Is The Message* was *The Gutenberg Galaxy* which argued that mass printing changed culture and was the motor of all change since the medieval period. Marxists would argue the decisive factor in this observable change was the shift from a feudal to a capitalist economy and a corresponding change in social relationships. McLuhan implicitly argued the same kind and degree of change was taking place with the modern means of communication. In this sense there was an historical basis for his argument, though it was phrased in such a way that few of his followers understood this. Phenomenological positivism: positivism asserts that the world can only be understood through direct examination of existing phenomenons, and is the basis of the dominant scientific methodology since Newton; in its extreme form applied to the social world, it denies historical and structural analysis. Phenomenology is that form of positivism in which it transmutes back into idealist thought by asserting that the perceptual-cognitive act/moment itself is the only way of knowing reality. Thus for McLuhan, the experiential character of the medium of communication completely overrides the content.)

A more contemporary example is provided by Gene Youngblood, who in his ongoing examination of new communications and information technology is very good at finding and synthesising the logical thread of development of technology, but who, in retrospect, reveals himself as totally unable to deal with existing or future social relations: thus his "predictions" from 15 years ago are absurd when read today because he assumes that technology alone produces changed

consciousness and changed social relations and he has a boundless enthusiasm for new developments which he never puts in the context of a social system which stratifies power. Youngblood is a good example of technological determinism linked to the post-WW2 development of "communications" as an overtly neutral and scientific but in fact highly ideological and capitalist-determined body of knowledge and corresponding set of investigative methodologies: comm studies is simply the most overt form of this.

But to get back to electronic transmission. Essentially what electronic communication establishes once and for all is a necessarily complex set of networks among different people which is so dense that it cannot be fully and effectively monitored. Consider: the mail as a means of communication can be closely monitored in several ways which are relatively simple: any suspect organization or person using third class bulk mail can have their address list easily reproduced by the police; similarly, outgoing phone calls can be easily logged. But it is extremely costly and inefficient to actually try to listen to, much less record and transcribe, all the phone calls made by suspect people and only the most "dangerous" or vulnerable get this treatment. (For a fuller explanation of this and its implications, see Hans Magnus Enzensburger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," in his *The Consciousness Industry*.) Furthermore, electronic communications systems remain significantly freer in some ways from interference at the point of reception. Obviously this is the case in radio and other broadcast reception--precisely why clandestine radio has been so often important in national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles in the Third World. (example of Radio Venceremos system in El Salvador; parallel case of underground radio in Italy) The mail system depends on a specific person physically delivering a specific item to a specific address and reception in this medium can be easily and totally monitored. However the current use of beepers by drug dealers, gamblers, and others has foiled police surveillance: the receiver is beeped and gets a number to call back, goes to any phone and calls another public phone and the deal is made without the police being able to keep up with the transactions. Add here examples from satellite dishes, etc. Add here the potential for disrupting the system due to certain aspects of its centralization (eg Captain

Midnight hacking of HBO). Add here the social alienation of the technicians needed to run the system (see "The Chips of Our Lives" and other readings in Processed World).

There is a tendency in this type of analysis to grant too much power to any one aspect of or development within the overall system. What is needed is a truly systemic analysis that accounts for all the different levels of communication and diffusion. And in terms of a radical analysis of how to organize within and around and in spite of the existing system, we need to be aware of all the different types of communication networking possible so that each can be used and maximized in its best inherent and operational way so that if one system is closed off others can be easily shifted to and exploited.

Reproductive System Technology

Benjamin's analysis tends to be built around the model of the lithograph and photograph where there is no original but only copies. However in both media there are still "masters"--the litho stone itself and the photographic negative. Even those who took to mass circulation printing, such as Heartfield, created a master plate and used the full talent of their craft to execute it. I think it is arguable that things have changed with the advent of reproductive systems such as xerox, vcrs, audio cassette, image digitizers such as Thunderscan for the MacIntosh computer, etc. Here the idea of a flawless copy is displaced by the fact of a "good enough" approximation. Thus the hit song is taped on a radio-cassette recorder and further tapes are then duped on the same or another dubbing recorder. Of course there is generation deterioration, but it doesn't bother the people who are doing it. Similarly, most people with VCRs copy broadcast programs or dupe movies on cassette on the slowest possible speed and accept the trade off of lower quality for inexpensive reproduction. Nearly total unreadability seems to be the only significant threshold.

A second and related aspect of current reproductive systems is that they operate on the desirability of copies of copies. That is people working with these systems, particularly on a consumer level, have no qualms about copying (or with satellite dishes, receiving) and in fact

take it for granted that they have the "right" to do so. To the point that when originators attempt to control their image, sound and other material, they are confronted with disruption (Captain Midnight) and wide scale flaunting of the law. (Surely more people have copied and continue to copy copyright materials than smoke marijuana...this is probably the most widely scofflawed behavior in the U.S. today.) The consumer domain is assumed to be the public domain. It is also clear that capitalism has a vague and widely contradictory understanding of this, so you have conglomerates which are hedging their own bets by putting money into sectors and activities which depend on ownership and control and at the same time are developing and selling hardware which undermines ownership and control. The capitalist state is fundamentally unable at present to negotiate the conflicting claims of different capitalists around these issues, and thus the actual working out of copyright ownership is an impossible tangle. Is a colorized version of a black and white film a new object which can be recopyrighted? Is a synthetic image taken from several pre-existing images a new and copyrightable image? Can the owners of the original images demand control or payment for the previous image material? What is the status of an image or a sound in the age of -age: collage, assemblage, montage. What is the nature of such material when it circulates freed of its original ownership? When it is significantly altered by the reproductive system (eg xeroxing a continuous tone image, digitizing a copyright image)?

